His Life Strange Combination of Colorful Failures

On Tradition of Service

A TRUE ADVENTURE STORY

By CECIL CLARK

It was a crazy idea, for the country, of course, was barren of horse feed; but no crazier than Brig.-Gen. Clark who rode a bicycle on the ice of the Yukon River to come out and join in the South African War. Or the coffin-like boats that were built to go through Five Finger Rapids.

Pocock had $500 and he proposed (in an ad in the London "Times" signed "Experienced Western Traveller") that selected companions should each contribute $1,250. He got 63 replies, and one day in January, 1898, sorted the candidates out till he got eight that were suitable.

They all came out to Ashcroft, where they bought horses at $20 a head, and corralled them at Hat Creek, 13 miles out of town. Spring was late in 1899, but hay was costing them plenty and they decided to make a start. Many others had gone ahead of them, and at Quesnel, as they followed the old telegraph trail, they found themselves climbing in and out of a series of mud holes. There were rivers to cross, trees to fall, and camp to make. And every morning the same endless search for strayed animals.

Pocock had an admittedly sarcastic turn of speech at times; maybe it came oftener with the burden of getting the 50-odd horses and seven cheechakos through each day's misery of swamp and flies. It was in the Blackwater country that young Arthur Curtis, one of the party, smarting under Pocock's remarks, rode off alone and got lost. They searched for him day after day, even with Indians, but he was never found. It was a wilderness mystery and topic for years, and many there were who blamed Pocock.

UNDOUBTEDLY he felt the incident deeply, believing that he had failed in the job of leadership. Remarking about it in after years he said, "In the devout belief that I was fit for leadership I guided better men than myself, paving their hell with my good intentions." If at times he was thoughtless, devil-may-care and adventurous, Pocock could admit error. "To thine own self be true," was to him more than a mere quotation from Hamlet.

He resigned leadership of the pack train group, and although they nearly starved to death they finally reached the Stickine River with 16 of their horses.

Pocock, meantime, journeyed into the Northwest Territories (now Alberta) where he renewed acquaintance with some of his old police pals and it was probably in one of these barrack room sessions that the long horse hike came up again. Maybe in the back of his mind was the desire to redeem his self esteem after the pack train incident. Up to that time the world record for long-distance horsemanship was held by Sotnik Dmitri Peshkov. A sotnik, by the way, is the commander of a sotnik (squadron) of Cossack cavalry. Peshkov had ridden his pony, Seri, from Vladivostock to St. Petersburg, 5,500 miles in 193 days, averaging 28 miles a day. Previous record-holder was Kit Carson, the plainsman scout, who rode the 2,200 miles from the Mississippi River to California, but had to dodge hostile Indians doing it.

With his plans perfected, Pocock rode out of Fort McLeod on the morning of June 28, 1899, leading a packhorse, and reached Mexico City on January 24, 1900, after covering 3,600 miles in 200 days and using up nine horses, six of them pack animals. He'd set a world's record of a sort.

On the journey through desert and mountains he met up with oddities in the way of ranchers, trappers, cowpunchers and desert rats, and ran the gamut of society from Mormon elders to the outlaw population of a mountain stronghold known as Robber's Roost, base for train and bank robbers, cattle rustlers and horse thieves. It was here he met Butch Cassidy of the infamous Cassidy gang. Maybe these fellow adventurers on the fringe of civilization felt some sort of kinship with the lone traveller. Anyway they took him at his face value, the "damn fool Englishman" who was out to see how far he could ride a horse!

This is the officer commanding the Victoria Company, Legion of Frontiersmen, Capt. Harold E. Ker.

IN MEXICO he got word of the South African War and scenting more excitement hastened back to England, and from there worked his way to South Africa on a freighter, to land at Durban in December, 1901, where he promptly joined Driscoll's Scouts.

After the war he went with an expedition to Greenland, and later did fishery research work for Oxford University at Spitzbergen.

In 1904 he formed, with the aid of his South African O.C., Driscoll, the Legion of Frontiersmen. It was an idea that snowballed, linking ex-servicemen with soldiers of fortune who'd globe-trotted from the Arctic to the Amazon, from Damascus to Deadwood City. All had demonstrated their loyalty to their country and evinced a readiness to serve again in peace or war.

It's said that by 1914 they could have mustered two divisions. Whether it's true or not, by the time the bugles blew cease fire in November, 1918, over 9,000 Frontiersmen had laid down their lives on the battlefield.

Little-known fact is, that in Canada over 600 served with the PPCLI . . . and barely 20 survived.

Fifteen hundred fell wearing Australia's uniform at Gallipoli, and the 25th Battalion of Britain's Royal Fusiliers was composed entirely of Frontiersmen, serving under Col. Driscoll, one of the founders, in East Africa.

Pocock, although over age, was in the scrimmage as well, getting his captaincy in the field in 1915.

After the war, Pocock was twice seen in B.C. In June, 1923, circling the globe in his power cruiser, Frontiersman, he dropped in at Cadboro Bay with an exhibit of British trade goods, and spoke to the local Rotary Club. Rotarian and currently Mayor Percy Scurrah, by the way, was once a Frontiersman.

Twelve years later, in November, 1935, Pocock crossed the Pacific in the Empress of Russia and stopped a day or two in Vancouver en route to London. Lean and swarthy, wearing a small pointed beard, the 70-year-old adventurer maybe noticed some changes since he went off to the Skeena war in 1888!

His sister, better known by her stage name of Lena Ashwell (decorated by King George V for her front line concert work) did well in her career. She became manager of London's Kingsway Theatre, and finally married Sir Henry Simson, physician to Princess Mary.

Her rolling stone brother, however, despite his half-dozen books and three plays, found his declining years dogged by financial difficulties. But thanks to Thomas Sutton (who had been dead 350 years) the rolling stone came to rest in cloistered Charterhouse just off London's busy Aldersgate. Sutton, who pioneered Newcastle coal and died in 1611, left funds to endow a school, a chapel and a snug haven for 80 male pensioners "gentlemen by descent and in poverty, soldiers that have borne arms by land or sea, merchants decayed by piracy or shipwreck . . ." So ran the writ.

The whole thing was called Charterhouse, but the expanding boys' school was moved out to Godalming in Surrey about 90 years ago during the headmastership of the Rev Mr. Haig-Brown, a name not unfamiliar to Vancouver Islanders. Familiar because he was the grandfather of present-day author-naturalist-fisherman Roderick Haig-Brown of Campbell River, also a Charterhouse boy.

His adventuresome life nearly over, Roger Pocock settled down as a "brother" at Charterhouse, doing a little sculpture on the side.

Came the Second World War and the bombing of London in 1941. Now in failing health, Pocock was moved to a nursing home at Weston-Super-Mare, within sight of the Bristol Channel. With the world aflame, non-combatants and civilians the target of terror bombing, the era of Roger Pocock, with its queer notions of honor, truth and decency, seemed to be grinding to a halt. That fall, just a month before Pearl Harbor, as Britain had her back to the wall, her venturesome servant, Roger Pocock, 76, took leave of the world.

Today his world-wide organization is styled the "Corps of Imperial Frontiersmen," and here in Victoria, command is in the capable hands of Capt. Harold E. Ker, of 1744 Duchess Street. His second in command is Lieut. Jesse Green, prominent local contractor, and Sergeant Major is Link Foulger, who helps with transportation down at the Dockyard.

In Frontiersmen's tradition of constant readiness, the weekly parades are devoted to training in jiu-jitsu, musketry, swimming and all phases of law enforcement, including traffic control and first aid. Apart from being sworn in as special constables in Victoria and Saanich, the Frontiersmen are an integral part of Civil Defence.

B.C. Commander is Col. A. A. Ransom of West Vancouver, who is the liaison with corps headquarters at Loretteville, Quebec, where Major General H. D. B. Ketchen, CB, CMG, is chairman of the federal advisory council.

Coast to coast strength is around 5,000 (250 in B.C.) and although there is no height, weight or age limit, the Corps insists on high moral character, a willingness to serve community and country at all times, and an oath of allegiance to the Sovereign.